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A vote to turn the tide

History is a one-way street. You never know what would have happened if we had acted differently. Had Hitler been stopped before he got started, one would never know that wise policy had saved 60 million lives.

Still — even if we never know it — my sense is that something historic happened when the House of Representatives voted to give aid to the Nicaraguan democratic opposition. To see that, imagine what would

likely have happened had the House not acted.

In Central America, this: To assure survival, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas would have moved to tighten their grip on Nicaragua and to subvert their neighbors. The Soviets would add fuel to the fire. Nothing could help them more. Sooner or later, the United States would have had to act militarily in what would have been a sloppy, unpopular, and perhaps inconclusive way.

Around the world, there would have been another toll: the word would be that the United States is still Vietnamized, impotent to act even against a Soviet probe close to home. What serious nation would rely on America? The alliance could unravel.

Instead, the House vote set up a different scenario. For Ronald Reagan got more power than he asked for.

Consider four characteristics of the decision. It was for overt, not covert aid; it carried the House by a big margin; it ran across party lines; it will likely give political rather

than military aid.

Overt is better than covert. Governments usually act secretly to lower the stakes: covert aid can easily be denied or ended. But the Congress made a pledge for all the world to see. Because superpowers can't back out of public commitments easily, the leverage on the Sandinistas is greater. Comandante Ortega should sense that he will not prevail; Nicaragua won't go Communist.

So too: A big vote for less of a program is better than a small vote for a big program. Some hawks are foolishly saying President Reagan could have gotten a tougher program if he had been willing to sacrifice some of his big margin in Congress. They miss the point. We don't need yet another on-again, off-again policy that can be debated and then reversed by one more vote. The large vote margin should tell the Sandinistas that they can't just wait us out.

And bipartisanship is critical. Almost a third of the House Democrats broke with Speaker Tip O'Neill's position. This included the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and the chairman of the Hispanic Caucus.

Mr. O'Neill was hurt on this, perhaps humiliated. He gave an interview saying his advisers were Maryknolls — a missionary order that sympathizes with the Marxist-Leninists in Nicaragua. He prevented Democratic Rep. Dave McCurdy's name from appearing as co-sponsor of the winning bill, thereby denying his own party some of the credit for fashioning a responsible compromise.

Mr. O'Neill, Mr. Reagan, and Mr. Ortega should learn the same lesson from this vote: you can't make headway without the support of the moderate Democrats in Congress. They are the swing votes. They're cautious, but not weak-willed.

Finally, aid to a political coalition is more important than aid to the military. The House bill provides help to "the democratic resistance forces" of Nicaragua. If Mr. Reagan is smart, that should mean the "contras" will become the instrument of a broad spectrum of Nicaraguan political leaders pledged to democracy. That will help the "contras" shed their dark image, boosting them in Nicaragua and in the United States, putting more pressure on Mr. Ortega.

What happens when America is publicly, solidly, and bipartisanly pledged to support a political front in Nicaragua? Mr. Ortega will sooner or later cut a deal that will set up democratic rule. The Russians will then leave Central America alone; the world will know that the Vietnam War has ended; the future will probably be safer than it would have been on history's one-way street.

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